A Biographical Sketch of Elkanah Watson.

William R. Deane

Albany, NY
1864

MEMOIR OF ELKANAH WATSON.

[Communicated by WILLIAM REED DEANE, Esq., of Brookline.]

Elkanah Watson was the sixth in descent from Robert Watson, who came to Plymouth in 1623. He was born 22d of January, 1758, at Plymouth. He was descended, in the sixth generation on his mother's side from Edward Winslow, third governor of the colony. His father and nearly all his relatives were zealous whigs and joined heartily by personal prowess and pecuniary contributions in the great struggle for national independence. He remained till the age of fourteen at the ordinary common school in his native town. His teachers were Alexander Scammell and Peleg Wadsworth, both afterwards distinguished officers in the army. They, in common with other patriotic spirits, saw the gathering clouds, and not far distant the Revolutionary tempest. They studied military tactics intently. They formed the boys in their school into a military company which soon gave it the air of an arsenal, with their wooden guns and tin bayonets suspended around the walls. "Piping times of peace" have since intervened for many years. Divines and moralists of all denominations and shades have preached absolute peace and non-resistance; and, if they have preached vengeance at all, have dealt it most heavily upon the head of him who should teach the art of war, or convince that it could ever again be required in our country.

Children should not even be indulged with military playthings,[1] and the song of the Shepherd Boy in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, "piping as though he never should be old," seemed literally a true picture of our peaceful lot and was presumed to be eternal. But with less prophetic vision and less preparation than even at that period, the cry "to arms" is now again rung in our ears, and almost precisely the same scenes are reënacted at the present day. The children have their military playthings, the boys their wooden guns,[2]

[1] The writer of this heard Rev. Dr. Channing about twenty-five years since, in a sermon in his own pulpit, in speaking of the education of children, say, that he would sedulously keep from them every military plaything. The sentiments immediately preceding, the writer has heard expressed at peace meetings in Boston.

[2] At the beginning of our present contest, "wooden guns and tin bayonets" were used; soon, however, real guns adapted in size to the youth of our schools were in use. One of the very first and most thorough private educational institutions in our city, the one in which have been prepared for college, more individuals who have become clergymen than any other of the kind in the state, now makes military drill a part of its discipline, and a branch of its tuition. Thomas Cushing, A. M., the respected and enterprising head of the Chauncy Hall school, is a descendant of Robert Watson, the first ancestor in this country of the Watson family, and a near relative of the subject of this memoir. In passing through Chauncy street recently, as we were opposite Chauncy Hall, the teacher emerged from the school in true military order with his company of boys, and after going through various evolutions, at the utterance of the words "forward march," they were soon turning the corners of our streets with correct military precision. Mr. Cushing speaks in his last annual report of the possibility of bringing military instruction into our public schools. We understand that the present legislature has in view the preparation of a law requiring all boys of a certain age to be taught military tactics as a part of their education.

our teachers march out their scholars as Scammell and Wadsworth did in 1776—the shepherd boy's song is hushed, and he, in common with others of all professions and trades, is thoroughly trained in all the arts of war. The love of our country has convinced us that it is our duty to fight; our souls are fired for battle, while the afflictions and bereavements which are the consequence, weigh heavily on our hearts.

Young Watson imbibed the spirit of his day. He learned his lesson well, and at the age of fifteen, in September, 1773, he left Plymouth for Providence, to become an apprentice with John Brown, a benefactor of Brown University, and then one of the most enterprising merchants in our country. In that year the tea was destroyed at Boston, and the difficulties with England were assuming a very serious aspect. The young men of Providence formed themselves into military associations, and often met to drill. He enrolled himself in the Cadet company commanded by Col. Nightingale. The uniform was a scarlet coat faced with yellow. The five companies formed in Providence were reviewed by the celebrated Gen. Lee in the autumn of 1774, and received from him the highest encomiums. "On the intelligence of the march upon Lexington, the five Providence companies flew to arms" says Mr. Watson in his journal. He spent the night with many of the company running bullets and preparing ammunition, and the next morning they marched, nothwithstanding the proclamation of Gov. Joseph Wanton, for the scene of action. Capt. Greene, afterwards the celebrated Gen. Greene, with his company of Warwick Greens, and Capt. Varnum, afterwards a Revolutionary General, with his company of Greenwich Volunteers, marched with the Providence companies toward Lexington. An express met them, after having advanced a few miles, informing them that the regulars had been driven back to Boston.

The mind of young Watson was fixed upon entering the army, but application to his father and to Mr. Brown, to be released from his indentures, were in vain. Mr. Brown, finding the army almost destitute of every munition of war, particularly of powder, directed the captains of his vessels on their return voyages, to freight with that article, and when the army at Boston had not four rounds to a man, most fortunately, one of Mr. Brown's ships brought in a ton and a half of powder, and it was immediately forwarded under the charge of young Watson to Cambridge, attended by six or eight recruits to guard it. Mr. Watson says: "I delivered my letter to Gen^{l} Washington in person, and was deeply impressed with an emotion I cannot describe in contemplating that great man, his august person, his majestic mein, his dignified and commanding deportment." Soon after this Mr. Brown having contracted to supply the army of Washington with flour, sailed for Providence with a cargo from Newport. This vessel was seized, and Mr. Brown was himself made a prisoner, and was sent to Boston in irons, charged with heading a party, in 1772, which burned his majesty's schooner Gaspée, in Providence river.

The whole community were indignant and exasperated at his seizure. A consultation was held immediately and it was decided to send an express to Plymouth in order to fit out two armed schooners

to intercept, if possible, the captured flour vessel, in her passage round Cape Cod, and release Mr. Brown. Watson was entrusted with that important mission, and with his musket at his back, on a fleet horse, he arrived at Plymouth at two o'clock in the morning, alarmed the town with the cry of fire, and aroused up the committee of safety. At sunrise he was awakened by the beat of the drum to muster volunteers for the enterprise. By two o'clock the same day, he with sixty to eighty others embarked on board two dilapidated fishing schooners equipped with two old cannon each, and with powder loose in barrels. They sailed reckless of consequences, determined to secure Mr. Brown. They had no commission, and had they been captured, would probably have been hung as pirates with little formality. They cruised ten days east of Cape Cod without success, and being pressed by a twenty gun ship, finally escaped into Plymouth. Thus young Watson sailed at the age of seventeen from the place of his nativity, in probably the first vessel that opposed the British flag, and but a few rods from the rock upon which our forefathers landed, one hundred and fifty-five years before, in the assertion of that liberty which was then bravely defended by their descendants. Mr. Brown was soon after released through the interposition of his brother, Moses Brown, the conspicuous and eminent Quaker of Providence.

The commerce of Providence was prostrated by the war, and in August, 1777, Mr. Brown and his brother Nicholas proposed to Mr. Watson to take charge of about fifty thousand dollars to carry on horseback to South Carolina, and deposit in the hands of agents for investment in cargoes for European markets. He started on the 4th of September, with a good horse under him, a hanger at his side and a pair of pistols in his holsters, passing through Virginia, via Fredericksburg, Williamsburgh, Jamestown, Suffolk, Edenton near Pamlico sound, through Newbern, Wilmington, Georgetown, N. C., and other places we now so often see in our papers as being in the track, the din and jargon of our present war, arriving at Charleston, S. C., after two and a half months travel, on the 18th of November. Here he delivered the funds which he had carried the entire journey in the quilted lining of his coat. On the 15th of January, 1788, a large portion of Charleston was accidentally burnt, while he was yet tarrying there.

Mr. Watson left Charleston January 29th, and continued his journey to Port Royal. He says of Port Royal Island: "Here are a few rice plantations—the staple is indigo—and some cotton is cultivated for domestic purposes, but as it is difficult to disentangle the fibre from the seed, its extensive culture is not attempted, although it eminently flourishes in this climate and is a most important article. Every evening we noticed the Negroes, old and young, clustered in their huts around their pine knot fires, plucking the obstinate seed from the cotton." This was of course before the great invention of the cotton gin by the celebrated Eli Whitney. Mr. Watson states that Beaufort contained about seventy houses besides public buildings at that time. He says "mutual antipathies and prejudices predominated at the south previous to the Revolution; and we had every reason to apprehend that, if not allayed by wise and prudent

measures, they would have resulted in a dismemberment of the confederacy."

Gen. John Winslow, Mr. Watson's mother's uncle, a noble, generous and accomplished man, a distinguished officer in the French war, was from the first of our Revolutionary difficulties, an asserter and defender of the rights and prerogatives of royalty, and subsequently held some judicial position in Plymouth colony. Mr. Watson speaks of remembering to have seen him "going in procession as a member of the Court, from his quarters to the Court-house. The Judges were clothed in robes of scarlet, and the clerk bore before them some formidable insignia of their power, the high sheriff with a drawn sword, and the deputies and constables with their staves, making up the escort." The jury were also in the procession. "This was the pomp and etiquette," says Mr. W., "royalty reflected at that period upon every department of the colonial government."

On the 22d of January, 1779, Mr. Watson having attained the age of twenty-one, and having been deeply disappointed by the effects of the war in his expectations of establishment in life, was induced to accept proposals made to him by Mr. Brown, with whom he had served his time, and others, to proceed to France in association with them, and sailed August 4, 1779, in the Mercury, Capt. Simeon Sampson (one of the most efficient naval commanders in the Revolution). He had for fellow passengers Maj. Knox, brother to Gen. Knox and others. The French frigate La Sensible, from Brest, having on board John Adams, and the first French Ambassador to our young republic, Mr. Gérard, had dropped anchor about an hour before, and Mr. Watson and others went on board to receive their commands for France. The Mercury arrived off the coast of France and dropped anchor abreast the walls of St. Martin, a city of the Ile de Rhé. The American Consul, Mr. Craig, came on board with several officers. The captain and Maj. Knox received them in full U. S. uniform, and as they landed on the quay, it was thronged with the populace to see (as they esteemed the passengers), "the North American savages." They had despatches of the utmost importance to the French government, and to our Ambassador, Dr. Franklin, then at Passy, whither they proceeded by land. Our insurrection having broken out in Boston, the French population confounded the whole nation with our city, and as Mr. Watson, Maj. Knox and the Consul mounted their mules and trotted briskly over the pavements of St. Martin, they were followed by a crowd, and their ears were constantly assailed with the cry of "Voilà les braves Bostones" (there go the brave Bostonians).

Mr. Watson visited La Rochelle, the stronghold of the Huguenots of France, from whom have since sprung, in our own country, some of the best and truest citizens of our republic. La Vendée, Nantes, Angers, Versailles, Paris, and other places, were visited by Mr. Watson, and noticed in short but comprehensive descriptions in his journal. His first interview with Dr. Franklin, of whom he had heard familiarly from his cradle, was at Passy. He says, his image was vividly pictured on his mind, and is well delineated in Trumbull's picture of the Declaration of Independence. Mr. W. dined with Dr. Franklin soon after, and his description of the party, the

ceremony, &c., is very interesting. He says: "Few foreigners have been presented to the Court of St. Cloud, who have acquired so much influence and popularity as Dr. Franklin. I have seen the populace attend his carriage in the manner they followed the king's."

Mr. Watson left Paris on the 20th of October, 1781, upon a tour through the western provinces of France and the Netherlands. He visited Peronné, Lisle, Ostend, Brussels, and Bruges, noticing particularly the canals of the latter place—the information thus obtained being afterwards of great value to him as a strong and intelligent advocate of the great canals since made in western New York, and other parts of our country.

Mr. Watson called upon Hon. Silas Deane at Ghent, of whom he speaks with some remarks, in accordance with the prejudices of interested individuals, but in the publication of Mr. Watson's *Men and Times of the Revolution*, he says: "I owe it to truth and justice, to record his vindication from these strictures by a potent pen," and there inserts a letter from John Trumbull, the brilliant author of *McFingal*, to whose criticism Mr. Watson had submitted his manuscripts.[1]

In 1782, Mr. Watson obtained a passport from Dr. Franklin and went over to England. Dr. F. also furnished him with letters to some of the most eminent philosophers and statesmen of England, among them Drs. Priestly and Price, and Hon. Edmund Burke. He went directly from Dover to London, and afterwards visited Birmingham, Oxford, Stratford-upon-Avon, Bath, Bristol, Leeds, Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool, and other places. He met at Birmingham the celebrated loyalist, Chief Justice Oliver, conspicuous in the early days of the American Revolution, and also a son of Gov. Hutchinson. He there saw Dr. Priestly, Mr. Watt, the inventor of the steam-engine, and other distinguished characters. He was much interested in the canals at Birmingham. Mr. Watson says in his journal: "With Dr. Franklin, always kind and familiar, I could hold converse as with a venerated father; but Burke seemed a being of another sphere."

Soon after Mr. W.'s arrival in England, he dined with Copley, the distinguished painter, a Bostonian by birth, and came to the conclusion to expend a hundred guineas which he had just easily obtained for a splendid portrait of himself by that celebrated artist.

"The painting was finished," says Mr. W. in his journal, "in most admirable style, except the back ground, which Copley and I designed to represent a ship, bearing to America the acknowledgment of independence, with a sun just rising upon the stripes of the Union streaming from her gaff. All was complete save the flag, which Copley did not deem prudent to hoist under present circumstances, as his gallery is a constant resort of the royal family and the nobility. I dined with the artist on the glorious 5th of December, 1782, after listening with him to the speech of the king, formally recognizing the United States of America as in the rank of nations. Previous to dining, and immediately after our return from the house of lords, he invited me into his studio, and there, with a bold hand, a

[1] See page 152 of *Men and Times of the Revolution*, to which volume we are indebted for most of the facts in this memoir relative to Mr. Watson.

master's touch, and I believe an American heart, attached to the ship the *stars and stripes.* This was, I imagine, *the first American flag hoisted in Old England.*

Mr. Watson was conducted to the house of lords by the Earl of Ferriers, who on leaving him at the door whispered in his ears: "Get as near the throne as you can; fear nothing." He found himself elbow to elbow with the celebrated Lord Admiral Howe. He there met both Copley and West (the artist), with some American ladies. The king's speech, in which the colonies were allowed to be free and independent, was delivered at that time. When the following passage was delivered by the king, "I have pointed all my views and measures in Europe, as in North America, to an entire and cordial reconciliation with the colonies. Finding it indispensible to the attainment of this object, I did not hesitate to go the full length of the powers invested in me, and offer to declare them"—"Here," says Mr. Watson, "he paused, and was in evident agitation; either embarrassed in reading his speech by the darkness of the room, or oppressed by a *natural emotion.* In a moment he resumed"—"and offer to declare them *free and independent* states," &c. "George III," Mr. W. says, "was celebrated for reading his speeches in a distinct, free and impressive manner."

On the 26th of May, 1784, Mr. Watson left London for Holland, by way of Harwich. He visited Rotterdam, Delft Haven, the Hague, Leyden, Haarlem, Amsterdam, Antwerp, and other places, and of all, gives intelligent notices and descriptions in his journal. He returned to London in a few months, and spent an evening just previous to his departure for home in company with Surgeon Sharp in his capacious library at the house of his brother, the well known philanthropist, Granville Sharp. Dr. Sharp entrusted to him two bundles of books, embracing his entire publications on emancipation and other congenial topics, directed to Gen. Washington.[1]

Mr. W. had previously noticed in that library of Dr. Sharp, the *Memoirs and Letters of Ignatius Sancho,* an educated African. It riveted his attention, caused him to buy the work and to seek the humble residence of his widow, of whom the letters in the memoir written by Ignatius, spoke with so much affection.[2] On the 21st of August, 1784, he embarked on board the George Washington, Capt. Smith on his return to America, arriving, after an absence of five years, at Providence, early in October, being so much changed by time and travel, that he was not at first recognized by Mr. Brown.

On the 3d of December, he embarked in a sloop packet for New York with Rufus King, Elbridge Gerry and Judge Sullivan on their way to Congress. Mr. W. remained in New York, about a month in the family of his uncle John Sloss Hobart,[3] from thence he went to Philadelphia, Maryland, Delaware and Mount Vernon, where he de-

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[1] See the interesting *Life of Granville Sharp,* by Prince Hoare, for some account of the Sharp Family.

[2] See articles in the *Boston Transcript* of February 4th and 9th, 1863, referring to Ignatius Sancho by Lucius Manlius Sargent, Esq., under the signature of Sigma.

[3] See *Register,* x, 149, for an account of Mr. Hobart.

livered to Washington the books in his charge from Dr. Sharp. Mr. Watson says: "I remained alone in the society of Washington for two days, the richest of my life." Much of the conversation of Washington, was upon the interior of the country, and in regard to improving the navigation of the Potomac by canals and locks, in which he was deeply absorbed. He allowed Mr. Watson to take minutes from his journals on the subject. At this period, Mr. Watson became greatly occupied in plans for internal navigation and improvements, and to him afterwards, in a very great measure, was New York indebted for her spendid chain of internal communication; and to no one, excepting Gov. De Witt Clinton, does that state owe more of its material prosperity previous to the new impetus of rail roads.

While Mr. Watson was in England, he contributed to the relief of Col. Silas Talbot, a native of Dighton, Mass., one of the bravest commodores of our Revolution, who was captured by the British, first imprisoned in the Jersey prison ship, afterwards in the Old Sugar House in New York, and finally in Mill Prison, near Plymouth, Eng. In 1788, Mr. W. made a tour from Providence, to the western part of Massachusetts and New York state, calling at Johnson Hall, Johnstown, N. Y., formerly the seat of Sir Wm. Johnson, and then owned and occupied by Colonel or Commodore Silas Talbot, whom he had aided while in prison in England, as before stated.[1]

It was from this tour of observation that Mr. Watson was induced in 1789 to remove from Providence to Albany. At this time, not more than five New England families were residents in Albany. Mr. Watson, by the power of his pen in the public journals and his personal efforts, effected numerous local improvements in that city.

While visiting Philadelphia in 1792, Mr. Watson visited the grave of Franklin, and mentions in his journal that his last interview with Franklin, who was then eighty years of age, occurred in 1786, at which interview Dr. Franklin observed, soon after entering the room, that "all his own friends were dead, and he found himself alone in the midst of a new generation; and he added, a remark alike characteristic of the man and the philosopher, he was in their way, and it was time he were off the stage; yet he delighted a circle of young people, the whole evening, with pleasing anecdotes and interesting stories; for, in his old age he was a most interesting companion of youth."

In 1791 Mr. Watson took a tour through the interior of New York state in company with Jeremiah Van Rensselaer, Gen. Philip Van Cortlandt and Stephen N. Bayard, Esq., the object being to scrutinise opinions on the subject of an inland navigation, which had been suggested by his former investigations.

By his efforts in promotion of internal improvements, Mr. Watson became intimately acquainted with Chancellor Robert R. Livingston, and with many other eminent and conspicuous men of the state.

In June, 1807, Mr. Watson retired from the city, and purchased a farm, on which was an elegant mansion, near the beautiful village of Pittsfield, Mass., where, at the age of fifty, he adopted the pursuit of

[1] See the *Life of Silas Talbot, a Commodore in the Navy of the United States.* By H. T. Tuckerman. New York: J. C. Riker. 1850.

agriculture, remarking that "he had embraced it at too late a period of life—after his habits and feelings had been moulded by a long residence in cities."

Here he resided nine or ten years, in which his most effective and valuable labors were exercised in the promotion of agriculture and manufactures. He procured the first pair of Merino sheep that had been introduced into Berkshire county.[1] "I was induced," he says, in the *History of the Berkshire Agricultural Society*, published in 1820, "to notify an exhibition under the lofty elm tree, on the public square in Pittsfield, of my two Merino sheep," which attracted many farmers and others. From this he was induced to effect a display of different animals in larger numbers, and thus was initiated the first agricultural fairs and cattle shows in the country. The wool of the two sheep referred to was manufactured into cloth with great pains, and far excelled any woolen fabric that had yet appeared in our country. It was spoken of in the papers of the day, and samples of it were exhibited in the principal cities. This was the origin of woolen factories in Berkshire county. At the winter session of the Legislature in 1808, the Berkshire Agricultural Society was incorporated, and the autumn of the same year an exhibition was held at Pittsfield. In a procession on the occasion, which was novel and imposing, "were sixty-nine oxen connected by chains, drawing a plough held by the oldest man in the county, and each member of the society was decorated with a badge of wheat in his hat. A platform upon wheels followed drawn by oxen, bearing a broadcloth loom and spinning jenny, both in operation by English artists, as the stage moved along," &c., &c.

In February, 1816, Mr. Watson returned to his former residence in Albany, abandoning rural scenes, flocks and herds. At that time the Agricultural society passed a vote that a premium be offered annually for the best blooded merino buck produced at the fair, in the form of a silver cup, of the value of $12, on which should be engraved the "Watson Cup."

Mr. Watson, for several succeeding years, in an extensive and volumnious correspondence in the United States and in Europe, aided the formation of agricultural societies, and advanced the general cause of agriculture, by diffusing the results of his own experience. Among Mr. Watson's correspondents were Jefferson, John and John Quincy Adams, and Madison.

Mr. Watson, in 1828, removed from Albany to Port Kent, on Lake Champlain—a village which had been formed chiefly by himself—a position favorably situated as a depot for the vast manufacturing products of the Au Sable river, and of unsurpassed beauty. The place received its name from Chancellor Kent.

Mr. Watson delivered an address or speech at Montpelier, Vt., at an agricultural meeting in 1830; at Keeseville, N. Y., in 1833, on

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[1] The first pair of Merino sheep imported into this country was brought by Wm. Foster, Esq , of Boston, in 1793. In 1802, Gen. David Humphreys of Connecticut, when minister to Spain under Mr. Jefferson, imported 200. Chancellor Livingston imported a few in 1809–10; the late Hon. Wm. Jarvis of Weathersfield, Vt., imported very largely, and to him more than to any other man, is due the rapid advance in the manufactures of fine wool. See *Patent Office Report on Agriculture*, 1861, p. 259.

Temperance, and frequently was he called from his retirement at Port Kent to join in the festivals of various Agricultural societies, of all which he may be said to be the father;[1] and finally by particular solicitation, he attended, in October, 1837, the twenty-seventh anniversary of the Berkshire society, at the venerable age of seventy-nine, and upon this occasion he delivered his last address before the society. "It was his valedictory," as his son remarks, "to all these associations; and here appropriately terminated his public course." The closing paragraph of his address was in the following words: "Permit me, gentlemen, bending under the weight of years, once more to bid you an affectionate—a final adieu. That the Eternal may continue to shower his benedictions on your heads, and inspire your hearts and those of your descendants in process of time, to uphold and sustain the society in all its original purity, through many generations, is my earnest prayer: once more, a long, long farewell."

The remaining five years of the life of Mr. Watson were spent at Port Kent, where, as his physical powers gradually failed, attended at times with severe suffering and prostration, he prepared in calmness and resignation for his departure. His intellectual powers remained unimpaired, and his mental industry unabated. His pen was his solace, and his last thoughts clung to those themes to which his life had been consecrated. His devotedness to public concerns impaired his private fortune, while it attested the purity and disinterestedness of his motives. He died at Port Kent, Dec. 5, 1842, in the eighty-fifth year of his age. A plain and simple obelisk bearing an appropriate inscription, marks his grave.

Elkanah Watson published among others the following works:

History of Agricultural Societies on the Modern Berkshire System. 8vo. Albany, 1820.

History of the Rise and Progress, and Existing Condition of the Western Canals in the State of New York, 1788–1819. 8vo. Albany, 1820.

The Rise and Progress and Existing State of Modern Agricultural Societies. 8vo. Albany, 1820.

A Tour in Holland in 1784. By an American. 8vo. Worcester, 1790.

History of Canals.

Town of Colburne, N. H.—The proprietors and owners of lands in the town of Colburne, county of Grafton, were taxed for continental and state taxes, from the year 1780 to 1790. Since 1795 the name does not appear among the list of towns. Can any of the readers of the *Register* inform us from whom the town derived its name, when the name was changed, and the present name of the township?

April, 1863. J. C——n.

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[1] In 1800, there were but few agricultural societies in the United States out of Massachusetts. In 1831, according to a statement in J. S. Skinner's *American Farmer* of that year, there were 786 agricultural and horticultural societies in the United States—44 of them in Massachusetts. Since then the number has greatly increased.